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Nevada third in toxic releases

By ADELLA HARDING - Staff Writer

ELKO — Nevada ranked third in toxic chemical releases in 2004, with a total of 269,304,058 pounds, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's new Toxic Release Inventory.

Alaska had the highest amount, with 512.2 million pounds, followed by Texas with 277.5 million pounds.

Nevada was at the top of the list for several years, after the mining industry began reporting releases. Chemicals in Nevada waste-rock dumps pushed the numbers way up.

In the past two years, a lawsuit Barrick Gold Corp. won on TRI reporting is bringing the numbers down, since not all the waste-rock figures need to be reported.

EPA no longer ranks the states, according to the agency.

Speaking for Newmont Mining Corp., Mary Korpi said today the company "continues to strive to reduce releases, but what is important is how EPA defines releases."

Newmont's releases "may be up and down, depending on how much ore we mine and process in a given year, and how much naturally occurring minerals are in the releases," she said.

But the biggest push has been in the reduction of mercury air emissions through the voluntary program among the major mines and now the new state mercury regulations.

"That's really where the efforts are going," Korpi said.

The TRI report shows that among Nevada mines, the Coeur Rochester silver mine near Lovelock had the most toxic releases to the air and ground, 85.3 million pounds, followed by the Barrick Goldstrike Mine, with 52 million pounds.

Newmont's Twin Creeks mine reported 49 million pounds of releases, while Newmont's South Area Operations north of Carlin had 30 million pounds of releases.

Newmont's Lone Tree Mine released 25.8 million pounds, and then the releases dive, showing Queenstake Resources Ltd.'s Jerritt Canyon Mine north of Elko with 2.86 million pounds, Glamis Gold's Marigold Mine with 1.47 million pounds and Cortez Gold Mines with 1.39 million pounds.

The National Mining Association reported mining data shows that air emissions of mercury at individual gold mines continue to decline, and NMA cited the voluntary reduction program in Nevada.

NMA also found metal mines nationwide reported the largest reduction in total disposal or other releases from 2003 levels of all industry sectors.

They reduced toxic chemical releases by 168 million pounds, down 14 percent from the prior year. The 2004 total is 1.07 billion pounds.

NMA also stated that more than 98 percent of the substances reported by mining operations occurs naturally in the local rock and soil.

"These are expected results. Metal mining always reports trace amounts of metals we move and store," said NMA spokeswoman Carol Raulston.

Environmentalists said today, however, that metals mines produced more toxic waste than any other industry, released 1.1 billion pounds in 2004.

Earthworks stated this is 25 percent of all toxics released by industrials overall, including 105 million pounds of arsenic, 369 million pounds of lead and 4 million pounds of mercury.

Washington, D.C.-based Earthworks stated today that despite the large mining numbers, the EPA is considering change the TRI reporting requirements to allow industry to report its releases every other year instead of annually.

"EPA's proposal would leave communities in the dark about year-to-year variations in toxic releases," said Lauren Pagel. "If enacted, this change would also tempt facilities to schedule their activities that result in significant amounts of releases during those years when they would not have to report."

Nationwide, the amount of toxic chemicals released into the environment by all industries dropped 4 percent from 2003 to 2004, EPA reported.

"Today's report demonstrates that economic growth and effective environmental protection can go hand-in-hand," said Linda Travers, acting assistant administrator of the Office of Environmental Information.

"We are encouraged to see a continued reduction in the overall amount of toxic chemicals being released into the environment," she said.

Releases of dioxin and dioxin compounds fell 58 percent, and mercury and mercury compounds were down 16 percent, while polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) were down 92 percent.

The TRI report showed the total of all releases fell to 4.24 billion pounds in 2004, the latest figures from EPA. That compares with 4.44 billion pounds of toxic chemical releases the prior year.

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